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Congressmen To Hear Tape Of Assassination Gunshots

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Focus On: JFK Slaying Probe

WASHINGTON — Much of the evidence will be coldly scientific, but it will be an American trauma — the killing of a president — on which the House Assassinations Committee focuses as it begins 17 days of public hearings Wednesday.

Almost 15 years after President John Kennedy was shot in Dallas' Dealey Plaza, the first public hearings into the assassination will attempt to supplant the 18-months-to-two-years of testimony that probably would be required if an actual trial were possible today.

But, as a committee spokesman pointed out, a trial isn't possible; almost all of the principals are dead: Kennedy, his alleged assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, Oswald's killer Jack Ruby and even underworld figure Sam "Momo" Giancana, central figure in one of the more widely touted conspiracy theories.

Yet, the most dramatic evidence the committee will hear is actually from Nov. 22, 1963 — a police recording of the actual shots.

Even committee investigators don't know what the recording will reveal — perhaps that Oswald alone fired three shots from a sixth story window of the Texas School Book Depository, as the Warren Commission reported, perhaps that four shots were fired by two or more gunmen.

The recording, inadvertently made when a Dallas police officer left his short wave radio transmitter on, was available to the blue-ribbon Warren Commission, a committee spokesman said, but "they weren't able to make anything out of it."

Technological advances made in the intervening 14 years may help pinpoint the exact origin of each shot.

The Cambridge, Mass., acoustical firm that is analyzing the recording for the committee, Bolt, Beranek & Newman, made the tests of the infamous 18½-minute gap in the White House tapes. It's regular work, a committee spokesman said, is developing equipment to locate Russian submarines.

Probably the most dramatic results obtained by the firm were in connection with the deaths of four students at Kent State University in Ohio, May 4, 1972. Using a similar tape recording of the shootings, the firm was able to determine who fired each of the shots, the spokesman said.

The Dallas police recording reportedly contains sounds which may be a fourth shot. According to ballistics experts, Oswald would not have been able to have fired his Italian-made rifle more than three times in the approximately 4½ seconds between the first and last shots.

Another shot would mean there was another gunman, committee counsel Robert Blakey has conceded.

In an effort to determine if the extra outburst is actually the sound of a shot, the acoustical firm re-enacted the shooting at Dealey Plaza on Aug. 20. The firm has not completed its analysis, a committee spokesman said Friday.

The acoustical evidence will be presented to the committee next Monday, Sept. 11. Even committee members may not know the results beforehand.

But if the evidence points to a second gunman, the committee may not be able to

come any closer to saying who it was.

Now, nearly 15 years after the fact, any witnesses in Dealey Plaza wouldn't be able to tell the committee what they saw that day, only what they "remember about telling about what happened in Dallas in 1963," a committee spokesman said.

Nevertheless, committee staff members seem to feel their work mainly has reinforced old conclusions, primarily adding new insight.

The presentation to the committee will be structured much the same as the hearings into the assassination of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The committee will address only "a representative sample of the people and the issues that people ought to think about," a committee spokesman said. The timetable for testimony is strictly limited and the committee is exercising tight controls on all advance publicity, including lists of witnesses.

"This is not a select committee to investigate conspiracies," he said, "it is a select committee to investigate what happened. We are not putting on a Kojak."

The first five days will concentrate on the murder itself, including the autopsy report and all evidence concerning the shots that were fired.

The next four days will look at the man Lee Harvey Oswald and the evidence that ties him to the shots that killed the president. The committee will also investigate his still mysterious journeys to Russia and Mexico and his reported connections to anti-Castro Cuban groups.

Congressional sources told the New York Times Sunday that Cuban Premier Fidel

Castro, in a tape recording to be played at the hearings, has denied any complicity in Kennedy's death. Castro also denied that Oswald had sought to become a secret agent for Cuban and had once, in the presence of Cuban officials, threatened to kill Kennedy.

The Times also quoted committee sources as saying that Yuri Nosenko, a former agent of the Soviet intelligence service and a mainstay of the CIA conclusion that the Russians took no part in Kennedy's murder, will present public testimony for the first time.

Four days will then be devoted to how well the various agencies — the Secret Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Justice Department, Central Intelligence Agency and the Warren Commission — performed during the investigation that followed.

The last four days will take up various conspiracy theories, apparently focusing most on supposed links to organized crimes.

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in 1976 found that both the CIA and the FBI had not cooperated fully to provide information to the Warren Commission. The committee, headed by Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, specifically criticized the agencies and the Warren Commission for not pursuing leads that indicated Oswald was paid by Cubans to assassinate Kennedy.

"We can explore what the Warren Commission could not — the Castro plots," a committee spokesman said.

Although the assassinations

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committee has followed some of those leads, it may have difficulty reporting to the public what it has found because the information is contained in classified documents.

Approximately 80 percent of the documents that the committee reviewed are classified, a committee spokesman said.

Although the committee is expected to see the home movie made by Abraham Zapruder as he stood in Dealey Plaza that day, it won't see the actual autopsy photographs and X-rays.

The committee staffers and

a team of forensic pathologists have studied these medical records — which were donated by the Kennedy family to the National Archives — but they will be presented as de-personalized drawings during the hearings.